



# The Nested Spaces of Graphic Narrative

Paul Fisher Davies

It is tempting to think of comics as semiotic objects to dissect with codes, or as neutral containers for a narrative, regardless of form. Traditions of semiotic analysis may then tempt a theorist to adapt approaches from linguistics that seek in the comics text parallels of specific linguistic realisations such as syntax and a lexicon; an approach which is open to the criticism of ‘reductionism’, a forced application of frameworks native to one medium inappropriately to another.

As an alternative, however, it might be possible to use ideas from a practical, social linguistics to help make sense of comics, operating at a functional level of abstraction. This would be to treat comics creation as a form of communication, of interaction between persons, socially mediated and performing the same sorts of functions as other discourses at a broad level — with its own systems and conventions and affordances at the level of realisation. In short, comics do what prose does: comics tell stories, recount memories, build discourses.

The ‘social semiotics’ innovated by Michael Halliday (1978), taking a function-based approach to the making of meanings in language, has been adopted by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006; see also Hodge and Kress 1988) to help describe meaning-making in multimodal media texts in this way, and adapted by Michael O’Toole (2010) to help account for, and offer a language with which to describe, displayed art, architecture and sculpture.



This article explores how such an approach may lead to challenging certain orthodoxies of comics, and to think about the functions of some elements of comics readers are in danger of taking for granted — like the idea that comics are made of panels as basic units, that comics are a hybrid of word and image tracks in parallel, and that they are constructed from a linear sequence of pictures, like a “very very slow movie”, to adapt McCloud’s image (1993: 8).

The idea that comics are essentially *art in sequence* comes from Will Eisner’s use of the term in *Comics and Sequential Art* (2008). This choice of words allows Eisner to get away from the ‘lowbrow’ connotations of ‘comics’ — to use the word ‘art’ alongside a neutral, even scientific-sounding term ‘sequence’. Scott McCloud picks up on and expands this definition in *Understanding Comics* (1993: 9), making sequence — in particular, fundamentally the juxtaposed, adjacent picture pair — the defining feature of comics. This has fallen into comics studies orthodoxy: what follows from it is the exclusion of ‘single-panel’ newspaper cartoons, and a focus on the importance of reading sequence that starts with Eisner’s desire to control the reader’s eye (Eisner 2008: 40–41) and continues to studies of how readers navigate the comics page pursued by Neil Cohn (2013: 186) and Renaud Chavanne (2010), amongst others.

But sequence is just one of the tools of comics. Comics are not linear and one-dimensional streams of coded meanings like a stream of sounds and syllables in spoken language, or a stream of text which may be ‘re-flowed’ as in an .html or .epub document. They exist on (at least) a two-dimensional plane, in an array, and the reading sequences of language are in tension against the two-dimensional, planar composition of art. They are presented as simultaneous to readers’ eyes, not presented in a linear fashion in fixed sequence — not even like the linear sequence of images (with the truly one-dimensional sound track) of movies. Thinking of comics as ‘sequential art’ limits any account of how comics work — how they are created, composed and read. This includes creating problems with how images relate to words, as well as how images may relate to other images.

It is useful to appeal to the linguistic concepts of parataxis and hypotaxis to help conceptualise this distinction between linear sequence and two-dimensional nesting. (The following account draws on Halliday and Matthiessen 2014: 428–556, Chapter 7.) In language, *paratactic* structures of clauses place pairs or sequences of clauses at an ‘equal’ level, each clause at the same level of importance, in temporal sequence implied, but not determined, by their spoken order:

“I read a book *and* I had a bath”

The linking of the clauses is accomplished by a co-ordinating conjunction, here ‘and’, though also, in English, a core set of words including ‘but’, ‘or’, sometimes ‘so’ and other, rarer ones can do this work.

The other possibility is to use a subordinating conjunction — and most conjunctions are of this type. These conjunctions grammatically subordinate the clause they precede, demoting its role in linear ‘sequence’ and ‘embedding’ it, so that the subordinated clause works as an adverbial for the clause to which it is attached. For example:

“I read a book *while* I had a bath”

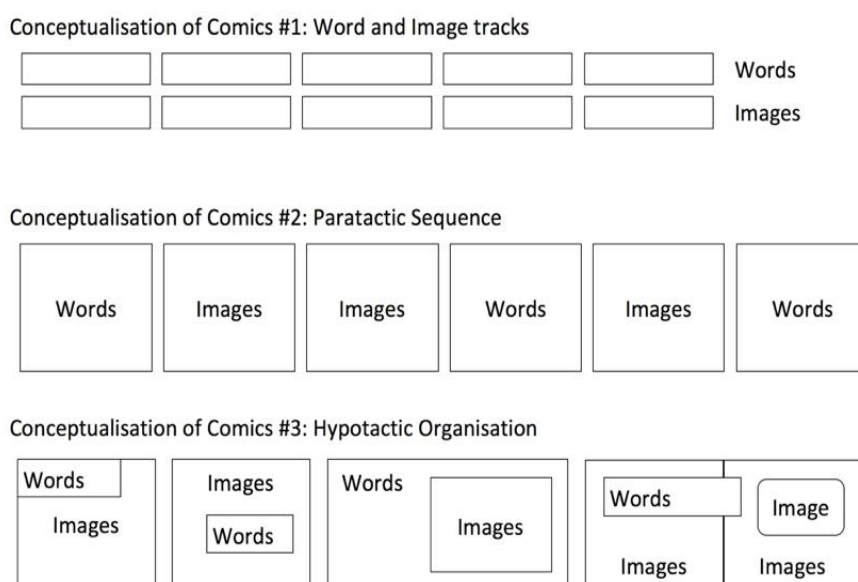
The spoken or read sequence is not reflecting the temporal relationship between these two clauses (centring around the verbs *read* and *have*); rather, the time relationship is communicated with the subordinating conjunction. One could say, with the same denotation:

“*While* I had a bath, I read a book”

This puts the clauses into a *hypotactic* relationship: the one is contained within the other.

Thinking of comics images as ‘sequential’ is to think of them in the paratactic sense. This leads to the conceptualisations of comics represented in **Figure 1: Conceptualisations of Comics**, as a text made not just of images, but of words in collaboration with them.

Rather than the ‘parallel-track’ visualisation of comics in Conceptualisation #1, so often alluded to in the comics studies literature since McCloud (1993: 153), or the concept of a reading sequence which switches between word and image as if the only relationship can be adjacent juxtaposition (Conceptualisation #2), the third conceptualisation seems, and looks, more recognisable as comics: words appear inside images, in hypotactic relationship; images often appear inside one another, in inset panels, with images arranged in a page layout (a ‘hyperimage’ like Groensteen’s (2009) ‘hyperframe’); and words may frame images, surrounding them with commentary, captions, labels and more.



**Figure 1:** Conceptualisations of Comics

The key point here is that comics and graphic narrative is not just ‘paratactic’ in nature; and here is a danger in thinking about it as ‘sequential art’, which leads to a focus on parataxis. Rather, hypotaxis is crucial to comics, and its importance should not be underestimated, in the essential function of comics as creating spaces within spaces, and stories within stories, and logical relationships between images and

text groupings that are not only a matter of juxtaposition in linear sequence.

To help think about this ‘nested’ creation of spaces within comics, and the importance of the hypotactic relationships that are created among ‘clusters’ of images and words<sup>1</sup>, it is useful to turn to Paul Werth’s “Text World Theory” (1999), developed after his death by Joanna Gavins (2007) to account for hypotaxis and framing in narrative written fiction.

Werth points out that when we engage in spoken conversation, this takes place in a shared ‘discourse world’, jointly occupied by the interlocutors in the discourse. When each says ‘I’, this refers to the speaker who is there present; ‘you’ refers to one or more hearers (excepting, in languages such as English, the general use of this term). Such interlocutors may speak of what the weather is like here, and what the time is now, and ‘here’ and ‘now’ have referents which both share when speaking face-to-face. It will be clear that actual conversations may vary from this ideal, especially when conversation is mediated by telephony or writing, but the basic scene is this co-present, shared ‘discourse world’.

In the genres of fiction, the rules of discourse change. The texts produced in fiction dislocate the pronoun referents. In fiction, ‘I’ is not merely a speaker at a different time or place — though fiction is separated, like a telephone conversation, in space, and also separated in time, it still takes place in what one can take to be a ‘shared’ world to some degree, albeit a ‘split’ world (Gavins 2007: 26) — but an imaginary, invented character: one who does not exist in this, the shared discourse world physically occupied by reader and writer, but in a ‘text world’ that is created by the contents of the discourse itself. ‘Here’ for the text is not ‘here’ where it is read; and all the persons or

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<sup>1</sup> Parallel to ‘clauses’ in spoken language, which focus around a verb, one may speak of ‘clusters’ in comics, focused on one or more depicted and/or written processes, typically — but not always — enclosed by a frame or balloon.

places or referents exist not in front of the reader and writer but in a world of shared imagination. (Text World Theory adopts some of these ideas from the pre-existing 'deictic shift theory' in this regard (See Stockwell 2002: 46; which summarises Galbraith 1995: 19–59), which noted this function of fiction.)

Nor is this especially unusual in talk. Even in day-to-day conversation, speakers may refer to other times and places, quote other people not present to the interlocutors, re-enact the conversations of others in the here-and-now. And speakers of languages have no problem with this. Such speakers are excellent at tracking these text worlds, and can follow them down to a further degree, in 'sub-worlds' that exist in the storytelling that characters may do within the fiction. When a character tells a story, it is a matter of course to conceptually 'push down' a level into the character's own further text world. For example, this article might quote Shelley who starts 1818's *Ozymandias* (available in, e.g., Shelley 2009: 198):

I met a traveller from an antique land,  
Who said: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert...

And now the reader and writer are in the text-world of the traveller within the text-world of the speaker of Shelley's poem; and Shelley's poem creates a text-world within this current one, of the discourse represented in this article: 'I' writing for 'you'. *Ozymandias* ends in a further text-world, that of the inscription on the abandoned stone pedestal, before coming back up to the traveller's world:

"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings!  
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair."  
Nothing beside remains...

When authors and speakers quote characters, then, within the text-worlds created by their mutual discourse, this creates 'projected text-worlds', and language users can track these to multiple levels. Not

only speech, but projected thought can do this, including ‘imagined’ worlds created by wishes, by modal verbs, and in many languages by counterfactual subjunctive tenses:

I wish I were in the pub right now...

The ‘I’ who wishes is not the ‘I’ who is in the imaginary pub, and the ‘now’ that is speaking is not the alternative now of the ‘I’ who would be drinking.

In comics, of course, text worlds like this are inscribed in *abstract enclosures* — the enclosures that comics readers, scholars and professionals call ‘panels’ and ‘frames’, ‘word balloons’ and ‘*fumetti*’. In parallel with the nesting function of projected speech and subordination in syntax, then, one might propose that drawing these enclosures enacts a ‘deictic shift’ function, creating ‘text worlds’ in nested structure in comics. This is not to say that such abstract enclosures are ‘the subordinating conjunctions of comics’, but that they serve a comparable function in enacting the nesting that enables a certain type of complexity in discourse. Certainly the idea that word balloons are comparable to ‘projection’ in hypotaxis is reflected in Michael Halliday’s functional linguistics; he and his colleague Christian Matthiessen use the following image from comics (**Figure 2**) to illustrate these structures in language (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014: 443):

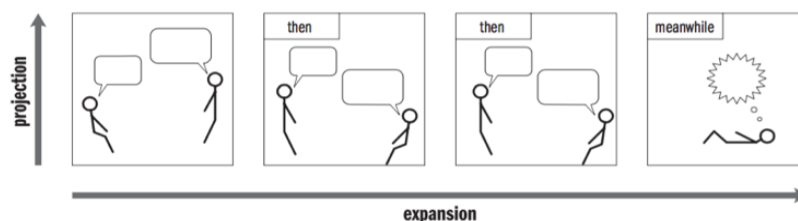


Fig. 7-5 Projection and expansion represented by the conventions of comic strips

**Figure 2:** from Halliday’s Introduction to Functional Grammar  
(Halliday and Matthiessen 2014: 443)

In language, projection and expansion may be handled by either hypotactic structures or paratactic structures; but there is a tendency towards 'expansion' as paratactic unfolding, and 'projection' of thoughts and desires as hypotactic embedding. This certainly seems to hold as a general pattern in comics, where progression of panel enclosures tends to take the discourse forward, and balloon enclosures within them tend to project thought and speech.

It follows from this that the 'panel' and the 'word balloon' are in this functional regard essentially the same order of thing: 'frames' are '*fumetti*' — the panel is always already a speech balloon. Creators draw enclosures to contain the projected text-worlds they are inscribing for their readers. These projections and inscriptions happen at multiple levels, marked often by further abstract signals that indicate the reality-status of the text-world inscribed: typical codes include 'cloud borders' for imagined worlds, 'curved edges' for projected speech, usually with a tail deictically indicating the speaker, black-and-white or sepia for remembered sequences or past-time sequences, and there may be other signals improvised in the course of a graphic narrative. (Whispers, telepathy, electronic speech, psychically or mentally charged images or speech, may all be marked with more-or-less familiar or improvised borders.)

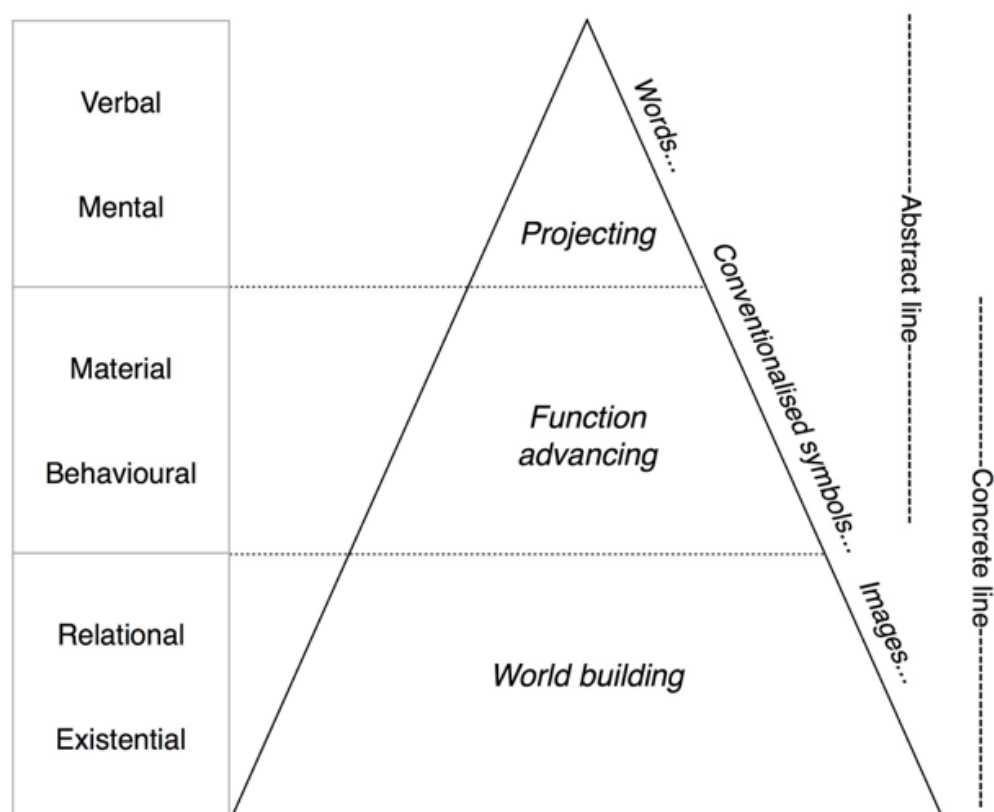
In comics, as in prose fiction, the depicted text-worlds may include representations of the discourse-world: in *Maus*, Art Spiegelman depicts himself as 'Artie' son of Vladek, interviewing Vladek for the narrative of holocaust survival which is the main story (Spiegelman 2003). At the start of Book 2 of *Maus*, Spiegelman 'pops up' a narrative level unexpectedly to depict himself as Art Spiegelman the artist, wearing a mouse mask, creating *Maus* the graphic novel. In *Logicomix* (2009), Doxiadis and Papadimitrou depict themselves discussing their own narrative, and within that show their subject Bertrand Russell giving a lecture, in which (a further text-world level down) he narrates his own past, seeing a billboard depicting the fiction of Jekyll and Hyde (a further contained text-world), and then an imagined, modalised text-world vision of himself imagined as those characters (230-1). The borders of panels and word balloons and



caption boxes all help readers to track these text worlds, alongside the colour palettes used, and this is done effortlessly. This is hypotactic structure: the reading order does not necessarily matter for comprehension, especially at the bottom of page 231; as long as we understand the relationships between these images, the sequence in which we apprehend them does not substantially change that understanding.

Comics, then, use these essentially nested spaces to construct the worlds of the story and continue the narration in a range of voices, at different levels of reality, time and space; and readers are well trained by a language-user's grasp of grammar to tackle this complex nesting. Mere 'pictures in sequence' do not reflect this sophistication, and do not capture the eminent suitability of the form for creating a rich, layered set of narrative worlds. Dylan Horrocks has already protested the importance of world-building as a crucial function of comics, in addition to their 'function-advancing' work in moving narrative forward (Horrocks 2003). In Text World Theory, Werth and Gavins propose that some sentences, clauses, and elements of the language are geared toward the work of 'world-building', which is to say establishing the text-world which can then be referred to by the text (Werth 1999: 180ff; Stockwell 2002: 137). Other elements of the language move the narrative forward, or the argument, or whatever function the text is intending to pursue. 'World-building' tends to be achieved by 'stative' verbs, expressing existential processes and relational processes (to adopt Halliday's approach to transitivity), and 'function-advancing' tends to be done with 'active' or 'dynamic' verbs (Gavins 2007: 64), expressing material processes, behavioural processes, and verbal or mental processes (the ones which so often go with 'projection' of new text worlds).

One may usefully diagram these functions in comics discourse — the way comics may use images to realise these functions — as follows, in **Figure 3**: Diagram of a Process Stack.



**Figure 3:** Diagram of a Process Stack

In comics, the creator draws what happens, not just what is. In a formulation attributed to Joann Sfar, “you’re not drawing the cat, you’re drawing the *pounce* of the cat” — the process in which the cat is engaged. For Halliday, ‘processes’ include descriptive and existential functions enacted by stative verbs (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014: 260–61). These processes ‘stack up’ as a rule, appearing in clusters simultaneously, when a creator draws what happens in comics (see Davies 2016: 117–33 for more detail). If the primary aim is to draw the function-advancing *material* action ‘running’, the artist is obliged to draw physical, *relational* characteristics of the character who runs, and of course to entail that the character exists. In the act of drawing a character speaking, in a verbal process, it is normally necessary to depict the speaking face in the material action, including perhaps gestures in support, and then relational properties of that face,

hairstyle, clothes and so on. These functions — which are separate in language, where a single verb captures each process in a clause — are simultaneous in comics, and tend to ‘cascade’ downwards in a triangle of commitments to draw and re-draw foundational, world-building elements such as the appearance of characters and the backgrounds in which they dwell, over and over again.

Of course, all that has just been claimed in the preceding paragraph is often overturned by comics artists. It is possible to avoid re-drawing the character by cutting them out of the frame; or drawing the outside of the house they’re speaking in instead; or drawing them in silhouette; or drawing the reaction. However, this may be seen as a response to the basic pattern of commitments, an artist aiming to evade the repetitions of comics, as ‘Wally Wood’s 22 Panels that Always Work’ (Wood and Crouch 1980) is motivated by the comics artist’s desire to make a lengthy dialogue a writer has composed more interesting over a sequence of panels. Still, the alternatives that creators may choose nonetheless tend to perform the function of world-building — drawing a detailed view of a hand instead of a face during dialogue, or a contextualising drawing of a car in which the characters are speaking, nonetheless functionally serves to build the world.

This article has considered, then, the function of abstract enclosures, how they create nested spaces in comics, and the functions of the simultaneous drawings of events in the ‘clusters’ that form the ‘clauses’ of comics. Much attention has been paid, especially by Scott McCloud, also to the negative space on the comics page: the ‘gutter’ (McCloud 1993: 60–93). For McCloud, this is where all the magic happens — in the space that is left when his operation of ‘juxtaposition’ has happened. This is a superb rhetorical move, key to his idea of comics as ‘the invisible art’, which happens not in the drawings but in the minds of the readers, ‘filling in’ these spaces imaginatively with acts of mental ‘closure’. But it relies on that white space being there; it relies on border lines separating it out in negative space; and it does not account for what happens when characters intrude into that space, or are not separated from that space by panel borders.

Text World Theory, as outlined above, offers a way of thinking about the white space, the flat plane of the page or screen, in comics discourse. Text World Theory starts with the idea of the ‘discourse world’ as the shared world occupied by a writer and reader, a creator and audience. In comics then, the page itself, up to its edges, the raw white material of the plane, constitutes the point of contact between these interlocutors, and so it is the location of this shared discourse world. For Malinowski (in Ogden et al. 1923) and Jakobson (1960: 350–77), the sheer ‘contact function’ of human interaction, maintaining a channel between persons, and (for Malinowski especially) creating a ‘communion’ between individuals establishing intimacy between themselves, is known as the ‘phatic’ function. In functional parallel, then, one may adopt this word to describe the ‘phatic space’ of comics: the plain white space of the page, and/or the material of its plane, up to and including the edges that a reader holds, edges that are contained not by an inscribed line but marked off by the world itself, the edges of the book or device that displays the comic.

When a character intrudes into this ‘phatic space’, then, they reach out to contact the reader. When a depicted character is represented straight on the page, not enclosed (projected) into a text-world by a bordering line, then the character is ‘unclosed’, exposed to that space of contact: the reader is brought into contact with the character directly — as directly as can be achieved. The character that transgresses the frame appears ‘three-dimensional’, ‘popping up’ into the shared discourse world of reader and creator by coming into contact with the phatic space. The background that bleeds to the edge of the page abuts the material discourse world, occupying the phatic space with its content, and coming into communion with readers. When the panel border falls away, the character is left ‘stark’, unprotected, in touch with the reader. This contact effect is exacerbated when an element is drawn at ‘life size’, so it appears to occupy the discourse world itself, or sit directly on the phatic space of communion between creator and reader. This can be seen in *Maus* (Spiegelman 2003), in Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006), in Chris Ware (2012), in Craig Thompson (2004), and many other works.

In this way, the lines of abstract enclosure do not only serve to advance functions of comics, in expansion and projection; to enclose text-worlds and created nested spaces of stories; but to present and withdraw borders between story-world and discourse-world, by the disruptions of which the characters in the story may come into human contact with readers interpersonally, engaging with the space of the reader, and involving the reader in the world occupied by the story.

The management of nested spaces in comics, then, presenting hypotactically-arranged text-worlds within text-worlds, sitting within a phatic 'contact space' surface shared by the creator and the reader, is a function of comics that has not been well captured in the familiar and frequent conception of it as 'sequential art'. This article has used Werth and Gavins' Text World Theory, and characterisations of processes and syntactic structures adopted from Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics, to help articulate this idea. In comics, the frame is a '*fumetti*', the panel is a speech balloon; it is into the phatic space which creators share with readers that those creators inscribe the worlds, and the worlds within worlds, that comics stories present. It is depth, rather than just sequence, simultaneity rather than a hybrid linearity, that the form offers.

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